SESSION 5

Op-Ed Best Practices

W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION

What are op-eds?

An **op-ed** is an article, written by someone other than an employee of the news organization, **that expresses the strong, informed and focused opinion of the writer** on a current and relevant issue. An op-ed is an original piece about a timely topic that has not been published anywhere else.

Characteristics of an op-ed

- Typically between 500 - 700 words.
- Has a clearly defined message and point of view.
- Incorporates the strong voice of a credible writer.

Remember: An op-ed is not a personal essay, story write-up, or think piece. Op-eds almost always require a clear and urgent public policy "ask."

When to use op-eds for storytelling (and why)

- Media outlets are increasingly less interested in policy op-eds from advocates and experts. They want to hear from a person who has been directly impacted by the issue who will tell their story. These op-eds are easier to place and more impactful.
- Op-eds enable more personal detail than social media posts, but unlike videos, they don't leave room for a story's depth and complexity (given the word count limitations).
- Op-eds can be more time-consuming than other forms of story sharing (e.g., sharing a social media post) and placement is not always a guarantee, so be intentional about choosing the story.

Basics of writing an op-ed

- Focus on an issue that affects a target audience and demonstrates the writer's expertise on the issue.
- Identify a specific problem.
- Have a clearly defined position and point of view.
- Defend the opinion by providing evidence.
- Propose a practical solution.



What to share in an op-ed

- **The underlying messages you're conveying** (value, problem, solution and action).
  - The call-to-action is an explicit policy you are trying to change or adopt. Ex. the state legislature must include child care subsidies in the budget.
- **The story that illustrates your message**
  - See Elements of a Story (protagonist, challenge, transformation).
- **Author(s):**
  - The op-ed can be written in first-person by (or on behalf of) the person who experienced the problem. (Remember you can use your own stories, too).
  - Alternatively, you can get permission from that person and describe their experiences in third-person or from your own perspective.
- **Data points:**
  - Tell a story that advocates a position and is supported by facts and research.
  - A few data points can show that this story represents a societal problem.

Tips for writing a compelling op-ed

- Hook the reader with an **anecdote** or **relevant news story**.
- Be direct in the thesis sentence and first paragraph.
  - **Be clear and bold in expressing an opinion.**
  - Considering the following question: If you could only print this one sentence, how would you persuade your readers?
- Make the point of view different from what is already in the discourse on this topic.
- Be clear and **don't use jargon**.

Additional resources

- Sample op-ed.
- Harvard: Guidelines on how to write an op-ed or column.
- Bret Stephens from the New York Times: 15 Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers.
- The Op-Ed Project.

